Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare

"..*Sastra* is never changed. And the *sadhu*... *sadhu* means who follows the *sastras*. He is *sadhu*. He also does not change. *Sadhu, sastra* and *guru*? *Guru* means who follows the *sastra* and *sadhu*. So there are three, the same." (S.P. Lecture 30/11/76,Vrindavana)."

The False Dawn of Guru Reform

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The False Dawn of Guru Reform

By Krishnakant

Iskcon Revival Movement

A response to: *'Cleaning House and Cleaning Hearts'*

(Ravindra Svarupa das)

"I did indeed receive *'The False Dawn of Guru Reform',* for which I thank you warmly. I found it highly informative and thought-provoking and I look forward to seeing how the various parts of ISKCON will respond."

- Professor James Beckford, Dept of Sociology, University of Warwick, UKs.

"I have received your paper which I found very interesting and useful in understanding the differences that exist at the present time with the Hare Krishna Movement."

– Professor John Saliba, Religious Studies Dept. University of Detroit Mercy, USA

"Thank you. Yes, I received the paper which was interesting to read. Best wishes – Marcus."

– Rev. Marcus Braybrooke, President, World Congress of Faiths

INTRODUCTION

Since the passing in 1977 of ISKCON's Founder-*Acarya*[1], His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (henceforward to be referred to as Srila Prabhupada), ISKCON's *'Guru system'* has been beset with crises and scandal. Currently there is a serious dispute over the legitimacy of any of the current seventy or so Gurus in ISKCON accepting their own disciples. A growing number of ISKCON members claim that there is documented evidence, previously suppressed by the movement's leaders, proving conclusively that Srila Prabhupada himself intended to remain the sole Guru (via a representational system) for as long as his movement was extant.

Whoever is right or wrong over this issue it is surely reasonable to expect factual information to be relayed accurately, and for honest, open debate and freedom of speech to be tolerated in its resolution. The Society's official mouthpiece aimed specifically at the academic community, entitled *'ISKCON Communications Journal'* (ICJ), itself recommends the following behaviour in dealings with members of other faiths:

"Always be honest and truthful. This is the basis for trust in successful relationships. (…) Listen to and value presentations by members of other faiths with respect. Give members of other faiths the opportunity to freely express their sincerely held beliefs and convictions."

(ICJ, Vol 7., No.1)

If such behaviour is expected towards members of other faiths, then what to speak of members of the same faith. As we shall examine, ISKCON leaders have fallen well short of the above standards in their approach to the guru controversy. As one serious observer put it:

"Still there are sceptical voices claiming that ISKCON, like the famous Janus, has two faces - the smiling face in dialogues with their external partners, and the strange, repressive face towards its own members - preaching wine to the dialoguing world and water to their devotees."

(Ulrich Dehn, ICJ, Vol 8. No. 1.)

It has been officially conceded by ISKCON's leadership that many of the movement's earlier problems were precipitated by the *'Guru system'* implemented in ISKCON immediately following the departure of Srila Prabhupada, when a number of the new successor 'Gurus' fell spectacularly from grace. ISKCON's leaders have subsequently made numerous efforts to assure both the movement, and the outside academic community, that these problems were largely resolved following a series of *'Guru reforms'* executed in the mid-80's. The most authoritative and comprehensive communication of this message was via an academic paper written and presented by the current Chairman of ISKCON's Governing Body Commission (GBC), Ravindra Svarupa Das. He presented his paper, entitled ***Cleaning House and Cleaning Hearts: Reform and Renewal in ISKCON,*** at the Vaishnava Academy conference held in Wiesbaden, Germany in January 1994.

ISKCON in Germany at the time was under threat of government repression as a *"cult",* and the previous excesses of ISKCON's 'Gurus', during the 'Zonal *Acarya*' period (1978-1986), had greatly damaged its image. This conference was thus staged as part of a defensive strategy, attended not only by academics but also state church functionaries who advised the German government on *"the sect issue."* Subsequently Ravindra Svarupa's paper was published in the *ISKCON Communications Journal*, which is sent to religious scholars and academics who interact with the Movement. This paper has thus become the *de rigueur* official account for how the *'Guru issue'* in ISKCON was resolved, not least since the author was himself the principal architect of these very reforms. Ravindra Svarupa's paper charts the course taken, both in evidential and historical terms, by the 'Guru reform' movement that he headed from 1985-1987, which ostensibly provided the 'solution' to the 'Guru system' which had operated within ISKCON for the previous 8 years. This was the so-called 'Zonal *Acarya*' system, whereby 11 disciples of Srila Prabhupada seized control of the movement via the unauthorised division of ISKCON into 11 separate geographical 'Guru zones'. In his paper Ravindra Svarupa outlines the dynamics and rationale behind the 'Guru Reforms' he engineered via five central assertions:

1. That the 'Guru-Reform' was based on implementing Srila Prabhupada's expressed instructions on the Guru.

2. That the '*Ritvik*'[2] alternative had to be rejected because it was not 'traditional'.

3. That Srila Prabhupada wanted a GBC system in opposition to a single *Acarya* system.

4. That Srila Prabhupada's own Guru had also wanted a GBC system in opposition to a single *Acarya* system.

5. That the 'Guru Reform' solved the 'crisis' which the 'Zonal *Acarya*' system had created.

In this essay we shall argue that these five central assertions, which form the basis of ISKCON's current 'Guru' system and which have been largely accepted by the academic community as factual, are actually entirely false. We will thus demonstrate that this 'Guru reform' was itself constructed on a platform of five fallacies at least as serious as those which underpinned the ill-fated 'Zonal *Acarya*' system in the first place. We shall substantiate our position by presenting evidence drawn largely from the same above-mentioned paper by the current GBC Chairman which is actually being challenged. (Material drawn from the paper ***Cleaning House and Cleaning Hearts: Reform and Renewal in ISKCON*** will henceforward be referred to as **CHCH**, and Ravindra Svarupa shall be referred to throughout as the *'author'*).

Fallacy 1:

That the 'Guru-Reform' Was Based on Implementing Srila Prabhupada's Instructions.

The author concludes his paper by noting that the 'Guru reforms' he instituted, and which led to the current structure of ISKCON with its some seventy-plus Gurus working under a GBC, was justified because:

> **"we now have a movement organized the way Srila Prabhupada wanted it."**
>
> **(CHCH)**

However the author admits in the same paper that a central feature of this organisation, the existence of a multitude of successor 'Gurus' to Srila Prabhupada, is not actually based on any specific 'wants' which can be attributable to Srila Prabhupada at all:

> **"On May 28, 1977, during what turned out to be Srila Prabhupada's terminal illness, the Governing Body Commission deputed a committee of seven members to question their spiritual master about the delicate matter of guru succession: How would the function of initiating guru be carried out in ISKCON after Srila Prabhupada's departure? In response to this question, Srila Prabhupada said he would select some disciples to begin immediately performing all of the activities involved in giving initiation—approving the candidate, chanting on the beads, giving the name, and so on—acting as an officiating priest *(rtvik)* on Srila Prabhupada's behalf."**
>
> **(CHCH)**

Here the author states that Srila Prabhupada's answer to how initiations would be carried out after his departure, would be that he would select "*ritviks*". *Ritvik*s are priests who act as representatives for the existing Guru, and thus operate as the alternative to successor Gurus. The author asserts, however, that Srila Prabhupada also made it clear that such *ritvik*s could become successor initiating Gurus in their own right:

> **"Those so initiated during Srila Prabhupada's physical presence would be Srila Prabhupada's disciples. After his demise, however, those same officiating gurus to be selected by Srila Prabhupada would, if qualified, become gurus in their own right. Those whom they initiated would be their own disciples, and Srila Prabhupada would be their grand-spiritual master."**
>
> **(CHCH)**

Let us look at the section of the conversation the author refers to above which allegedly proves that, after his demise, Srila Prabhupada would become 'grand-spiritual master' as his qualified disciples initiated their own disciples:

> **Tamal Krsna Goswami:** **No. He is asking that these *ritvik Acaryas*, they are officiating, giving *diksa*[3], (there)... the people who they give *diksa* to, whose disciples are they?**
>
> **Srila Prabhupada:** **They are his disciples.**
>
> **Tamal Krsna Goswami:** **They are his disciples.**
>
> **Srila Prabhupada:** **Who is initiating ... his grand-disciple ...**
>
> **Satsvarupa dasa Goswami:** **Then we have a question concerning ...**
>
> **Srila Prabhupada:** **When I order you become guru, he becomes regular guru. That's all. He becomes disciple of my disciple.**[4]

It is hard to see from the above how the author arrived at his conclusions, since there is no mention of either Srila Prabhupada's demise, nor the need of the selected *ritvik*s to become qualified. Rather, mention is made only of the need for a specific *'order'* to become an initiating (*diksa*) Guru. In the absence of such an order we are left only with the author's own admission: that Srila Prabhupada's response to the question of how initiations would go on after his departure was that he would recommend some *ritvik*s to perform initiations. The fact that no such order exists is admitted by the author when he states that the authority for the *ritvik*s to become Gurus came not from a direct order from Srila Prabhupada, but rather only from the GBC's *'understanding'*

that this was the case:

"In July, Srila Prabhupada selected eleven members of the GBC (then twenty in number) to begin acting at once as officiating gurus. Thus the GBC *understood* Srila Prabhupada to have chosen the first initiating gurus to succeed him."

(CHCH, emphasis added)

The reader might note that this is the same GBC that also *'understood'* that they were meant to operate a 'Zonal *Acarya*' system for nearly a decade. This lack of a specific order from Srila Prabhupada is again confirmed by the author when he argues that there was an 'indirect' and 'oblique' designation of the Gurus, with simply an *'expectation'* on Srila Prabhupada's part that they should become *Diksa* Gurus:

"In response to the question of initiation after his departure, Srila Prabhupada gave a list of "officiating gurus," designating them in an indirect or oblique manner. He *expected* them to become "regular gurus" in the future, but there was no "hand-picking of successors," no laying on of hands or anointing with oil, no transfer of power to some special and exclusive group"

(CHCH, emphasis added)

Unless the author is able to read minds it would be impossible for him to know for certain what Srila Prabhupada *'expected',* since he has previously admitted that these expectations were at best indicated in an *'oblique'* manner. This nebulous theory is accompanied by the following remarkable assertion:

"Yet they were pressing for a selection of successor gurus, the ultimate position to the ambitious. Hamsadutta and Kirtanananda had already been rebuked by Srila Prabhupada for receiving *guru-puja* "in the presence of the spiritual master," a serious transgression. Without any indication from Srila Prabhupada in this manner, there would likely have been chaos. Yet Srila Prabhupada clearly did not want to give his sanction to unfit people, a spiritual error. So he *selected* them without *endorsing* them."

(CHCH, emphasis added)

But the author has already admitted that the only selection made was for '*ritvik*s':

"In July, Srila Prabhupada selected eleven members of the GBC (then twenty in number) to begin acting at once as *officiating gurus*."

(CHCH, emphasis added)

We completely agree with the author that a selection of *ritvik*s is not necessarily an endorsement of their efficacy as *ritvik*s. Unfortunately for the author's case it is patently not a selection of Gurus either! Indeed the author goes on to admit that his 'Guru reforms' were in reality based on little more than his *'conviction'* that ISKCON must continue to have Gurus:

"It was *my conviction* that we could retain in ISKCON the full-fledged position of guru, as delineated by the Scriptures, a position that did not essentially involve being the autonomous autocratic head of an institution, did not essentially disallow discussion, consultation, revision and adjustment, and did not forbid collegial decision-making as a kind of lese majesté."

(CHCH, emphasis added)

This admission that the 'Guru reform' process was not guided by *any* specific order from Srila Prabhupada, is further elaborated by the author:

"The first effort of the "guru reform movement" was to urge a strengthening commitment to spiritual purification on everyone's part. The second effort was to persuade the GBC to dismantle the "zonal *Acarya* system" efficiently and decisively. We were able to put forward two proposals to the GBC, which, taken together, would dismantle the system. The first was to make the process of receiving authorization to initiate radically more open. Initially, the "initiating *Acarya* standing committee" had the power to appoint new gurus; in 1982, it was changed to a three-fourths vote of the GBC. Up until 1986, only some half-dozen new gurus had been added (and a couple removed). From my perspective, the central intent of this proposal was to eliminate a de facto "property requirement" for becoming an initiating guru. Since a guru had to have his exclusive initiating zone, one or more of the established gurus had to lose territory to create a zone for any new gurus. "

(CHCH)

Here it is made clear by the author that the reform *'proposals'* were not in response to any direct instructions from Srila Prabhupada, but simply political measures by which they could bring about the 'dismantling' of the existing system. The 'reform leaders' simply needed to 'fix' a state of affairs they did not agree with, and they thus had to take whatever measures were materially expedient to achieve their goal:

"The guru zones became more unified than ISKCON as a whole, which was becoming increasingly fragmented, turning into a kind of amphictyony of independently empowered leaders. The paradigm of the reform movement,

in contrast, envisioned ISKCON temples in which the disciples of many different gurus could all work together for their common cause. The unifying personality was to be the founder-*Acarya* of the institution, Srila Prabhupada, the master of all subsequent gurus and disciples. This could be achieved only by eliminating the implicit property requirement for being a guru, something that would happen if the authorizing process were opened up and the number of gurus increased."

(CHCH)

Here the author reveals that the 'Guru system' in operation today in ISKCON is the result of whatever measures the 'reform leaders' decided were necessary in order to achieve their *new* "paradigm". Thus a political solution was sought, engineered solely to devolve more power to those who wanted it, rather than a spiritual solution based on the actual orders of the Founder-Guru of ISKCON, Srila Prabhupada.

By the author's own admission then, today's ISKCON is replete with '*Diksa* Gurus' as a result of his *personal* 'conviction', and the GBC's *'understanding',* and not through any explicit order to this effect from the Founder; who we must remember only selected *ritvik*s to continue initiations within the institution.

Recently in the ICJ Anuttama Das, ISKCON Communications Director, who takes on much of the responsibility for interacting with the public on behalf of ISKCON, is quoted from a previous issue of the ICJ, wherein he also perpetuates the *false* 'Guru appointment' idea:

"The traditional model in most Indian religious traditions is a hierarchical organisation, with the concentration of power in the hands of one individual, the guru, or *Acarya*. Shortly before passing away, my teacher, Prabhupada, established a Governing Body Commission, a group of people to oversee the ISKCON organisation. After his death in 1977, there was a series of crises with some of the topmost, hand-selected leaders who had been appointed as gurus."

(*ICJ,* Volume 8, No.1, Anuttama Das)

As we have seen above, not only is this 'hand-picked appointment of Gurus' *false*, but it is not even agreed on by the author:

"Those so initiated during Srila Prabhupada's physical presence would be Srila Prabhupada's disciples. After his demise, however, those same officiating gurus to be selected by Srila Prabhupada would, if *qualified,* become gurus in their own right. […] In response to the question of initiation after his departure, Srila Prabhupada gave a list of "officiating gurus," designating them in an indirect or oblique manner. He expected them to become "regular gurus" in the future, but there was *no "hand-picking of successors," no* laying on of hands or anointing with oil, no transfer of power to some special and exclusive group"

(CHCH, emphasis added)

Thus we have the Chairman of ISKCON stating quite categorically that there was *no* 'hand-picking' of Guru successors, and that they would only emerge if qualified. This however completely contradicts ISKCON's Communications Director's version of "hand-selected leaders who had been appointed as gurus", and merely strengthens the case for less suppression and repression, and more honest and open-minded dialogue on this issue.

Fallacy 2:

That the *'Ritvik'* Alternative Had To Be Rejected Because It Was Not 'Traditional'

We have seen above that the 'selection of *ritvik*s' by Srila Prabhpada to continue initiations in ISKCON (as his response to the question of Guru succession after his departure) is central to the author's case - that a multiple Guru succession was supposed to have occurred after his departure. The author attempts to justify his rejection of a literal acceptance of the order for *ritvik*s to continue giving initiations after Srila Prabhupada's departure, on the basis that this would be an unacceptable change to the tradition:

"Among those who focused on the lack of qualified people to be gurus, some thought the solution was to devise a way to continue the movement and yet eliminate the position of guru as far as possible. Initiations would continue, but the guru would be considered some sort of apprentice or merely a formal ecclesiastical functionary. To my mind, these people were proposing an *essential change in the tradition*, not merely an adaptation to new circumstances."

(CHCH)

Here the author describes the adoption of a system using an 'ecclesiastical functionary', which would be akin to a *ritvik* priest, as constituting an *'essential change'* in the tradition. This is a highly self-contradictory position for the author to take since he has, elsewhere, also stated that it was the *ritvik* system itself which better reflected tradition:

"Two deviations from Prabhupada's order - the "zonal *Acarya*" system and the "posthumous *ritvik*" system - rest on adherence to the traditional idea of leadership. Each in its own way presumes that genuine authoritative leadership for the movement is found only when an autocratic figure becomes recognised by his compelling, charismatic presence or "self-effulgence", and who can then personify the institution. "[5]

Above, the author confesses that the "*ritvik* system" is actually based on the '*traditional*' idea of leadership. Returning to CHCH, we see the author again confirms that the existence of a sole 'charismatic' and 'autocratic' Guru, which results from a *ritvik* system, is again appealing to the 'traditional model' of religious leadership: Ultimately we are dealing with institutionalised circular thinking:

> **"The problem arose when the conception of guru was implicitly based on a traditional model of an inspired, charismatic spiritual autocrat, an absolute and autonomously decisive authority, around whom an institution takes shape as the natural extension and embodiment of his charisma. Indeed, Srila Prabhupada himself was such a guru. […]The *Acarya* in this last sense denotes a prominent and traditional form of religious leadership in India: in which a single, charismatic individual attracts others to him and by a natural process an institution forms about him. In this typically premodern style of leadership, the organization is very much a personal extension, a veritable embodiment, of that charismatic individual. (Srila Prabhupada is often quoted as having said that ISKCON was "his body.")**
>
> **(CHCH)**

He then goes on to contrast these traditional models of organisation with the 'GBC model' which he sought to institute as part of the reforms, and makes it clear that it was these 'reforms' which constituted the radical *departure* from tradition:

> **"The problem arose when the conception of guru was implicitly based on a traditional model of an inspired, charismatic spiritual autocrat, an absolute and autonomously decisive authority, around whom an institution takes shape. Yet starting in 1970, Srila Prabhupada had worked diligently to establish a quite different sort of leadership structure in ISKCON, a structure he repeatedly emphasized that would continue after him. This is a model of management found in distinctly modern institutions, that of a corporate board of directors, called in ISKCON "the Governing Body Commission. […] The *Acarya* in this last sense denotes a prominent and traditional form of religious leadership in India […] ISKCON, however, represents a *departure* from this archaic form of organization. Srila Prabhupada repeatedly stressed his intention that ISKCON would not, after his departure, be managed by a single *Acarya*, but rather by the board of directors, the Governing Body Commission, that he formed and began to train in 1970. Srila Prabhupada's intention, and his departure from the tradition of the institutional *Acarya*, is shown in a striking way in his will. Traditionally, it was in the first article of his will that an *Acarya* named his successor, passing on his institution to his heir as if it were his personal property. The first article of Srila Prabhupada's will reads: "The Governing Body Commission (GBC) will be the ultimate managing authority for the entire International Society for Krishna Consciousness."**
>
> **(CHCH, emphasis added)**

So the author makes it clear above that the *ritvik* system, which he rejected because it was not traditional, is what actually better represents the traditional model! On the other hand he also admits that the GBC/Guru model, introduced through his reforms, is in fact not in line with tradition at all; *"ISKCON, however, represents a departure from this archaic form of organization".* At present, ISKCON would also appear to represent a departure from the explicit instruction of its founder to run the more 'traditional' *ritvik* system.

Fallacy 3:

That The GBC System Is In Opposition To The Single *Acarya* SYSTEM

The author contends that the GBC system operates in stark opposition to the traditional single *Acarya* system:

> **"I was able to present a paper that combined analysis and polemics to argue that in violation of the desires of Srila Prabhupada, the traditional post of the "institutional *Acarya*" had been established in ISKCON and that this *Acarya* system was essentially in conflict with the GBC system so carefully established by Srila Prabhupada. […] Srila Prabhupada repeatedly stressed his intention that ISKCON would not, after his departure, be managed by a single *Acarya*, but rather by the board of directors, the Governing Body Commission."**
>
> **(CHCH)**

In the most recent publication of the ICJ he makes the same claim:

> **"I am very much dedicated to the principle of the GBC; its establishment and the implementation of the principle behind it was a major achievement of Prabhupada's. In my opinion, the GBC is a good model of leadership. In its formation, Prabhupada took some ideas from Western corporate structure, the GBC being the name of the Board of Directors of the Indian Railroad, a British corporate institution. But Prabhupada also talks of how the idea of co-operation, cohesiveness and working together is fundamental to the notion of *sankirtana;* this idea of basing leadership on the notion of *sankirtana* is in contrast with the older, more traditional, hierarchical Indian model of a single, self-effulgent *Acarya* who heads an institution. This *sankirtana* style of leadership and management is what Prabhupada wanted."**
>
> **(ICJ, Volume 8, No.1, *'Restoring The Authority of The Guru',* Ravindra Svarupa Das)**

It is curious that the author should so consistently and strongly argue that there is some sort of impenetrable dichotomy between management via a single *Acarya*, and management via a GBC. After all, the author himself fully concedes that the management of ISKCON via a GBC system had already been in place since 1970 (a full 7 years before the physical demise of Srila Prabhupada):

> **"Yet starting in 1970, Srila Prabhupada had worked diligently to establish a quite different sort of leadership structure in ISKCON, a structure he repeatedly emphasized that would continue *after* him."**
>
> **(CHCH, emphasis added)**

The author has also admitted above that this would be the system that 'would continue *after* him'. The author convincingly substantiates this assertion by referring to the Last Will and Testament of Srila Prabhupada:

> **"The first article of Srila Prabhupada's will reads: "The Governing Body Commission (GBC) will be the ultimate managing authority for the entire International Society for Krishna Consciousness."**
>
> **(CHCH)**

The very next line of the Will also makes it clear that this system of management was to be no different to that which had already been in place in ISKCON:

> **"Each temple will be an ISKCON property and will be managed by three executive directors. The system of management will continue as it is now and there is *no* need of any change."[6]**

Thus the author agrees that the GBC system, as established in ISKCON in 1970, would be that which continues in ISKCON *after* Srila Prabhupada's departure. However this system was run in conjunction with a single institutional *Acarya* system, not as an alternative to, or in opposition with it. This is also admitted by the author when discussing the running of ISKCON whilst Srila Prabhupada was on the planet: Then the candidate will automatically become initiated by Srila Prabhupada.

> **"The problem arose when the conception of guru was implicitly based on a traditional model of an inspired, charismatic spiritual autocrat, an absolute and autonomously decisive authority, around whom an institution takes shape as the natural extension and embodiment of his charisma. Indeed, *Srila Prabhupada himself was such a guru.* […] The *Acarya* in this last sense denotes a prominent and traditional form of religious leadership in India: in which a single, charismatic individual attracts others to him and by a natural process an institution forms about him. In this typically pre-modern style of leadership, the organization is very much a personal extension, a veritable embodiment, of that charismatic individual. (*Srila Prabhupada is often quoted as having said that ISKCON was "his body."*)**
>
> **(CHCH, emphasis added)**

The author admits here that Srila Prabhupada himself was a traditional single institutional *Acarya*, and further that he had set up ISKCON to be an organisation which is simply the extension of such an institutional single *Acarya*. An observation that is further strengthened by the author's description of the environment generated under the leadership of a traditional institutional *Acarya*:

> **"The paradigm of the institutional *Acarya* envisioned a zone unified and made coherent by a common devotion and submission to a single person."**
>
> **(CHCH)**

There is no one in ISKCON, including the author, who would disagree that this was exactly how the whole of ISKCON operated during the time Srila Prabhupada was physically present on the planet. And yet as we have seen, the author has conceded that at this time the organisation was also managed by the GBC, and further that this is the system which should continue to manage ISKCON. This means that, contrary to the author's assertion, the GBC system does not conflict with a single institutional *Acarya* system. Both features can and have operated side by side under Srila Prabhupada's direction. It is also clear from the Will that this is the system that was intended to continue to manage ISKCON even after the single *Acarya* disappears. Indeed, the author has even conceded that the GBC was set up simply to manage on behalf of the single institutional *Acarya*, Srila Prabhupada, and not as a mechanism in opposition to rule by a single institutional *Acarya*:

> **"As time went on he tried to turn as much management over to the GBC as possible, intervening only when there were crises."**
>
> **(CHCH)**

This becomes crystal clear when we look at the definition of the GBC's function, as given by the GBC themselves in their own official resolutions:

> "**Resolved: The GBC (Governing Body Commission) has been established by His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada to represent Him in carrying out the responsibility of managing the International Society for Krishna Consciousness of which He is the Founder-*Acarya* and supreme authority. The GBC accepts as its life and soul His divine instructions and recognises that it is completely dependent on His mercy in all respects. The GBC has *no other function or purpose* other than to execute the instructions so kindly given by His Divine Grace and preserve and spread His Teachings to the world in their pure form."[7]**

This makes it very clear that the GBC is simply an *executive*, not a legislative body in nature. It exists solely to implement the instructions of the *Acarya*, and in this way act simply as an instrument by which the rule of the "supreme authority" - the institutional *Acarya*, Srila Prabhupada - can be instituted. The GBC has no other function than to *'execute'* the will of the institutional *Acarya* who has appointed the GBC expressly for this purpose, and this situation was not to change at any time, regardless of Srila Prabhupada's presence. This is clearly spelt out in a document that was used to incorporate the GBC in 1970:

> **"As we have increased our volume of activities, now I think a Governing Body Commission (hereinafter referred to as the GBC) should be established. I am getting old, 75 years old, therefore at any time I may be out of the scene, therefore I think it is necessary to give instruction to my disciples how they shall manage the whole institution. [...] My duty was to first appoint twelve (12) persons to my free choice amongst my disciples and I do it now and their names are as follows [...] These personalities are now considered as my direct representatives. While I am living they will act as my zonal secretaries and after my demise they will be known as Executors. [...] The purpose of the Governing Body Commission is to act as the instrument for the execution of the Will of His Divine Grace." [8]**

It is made clear here that the GBC's function after the departure of the *Acarya* is non-different to that which existed during his presence - to act as the instruments for executing the will of the single institutional *Acarya*. All that changes, as necessitated by the law of probate, is the language, as the living representatives now move from being designated as 'zonal secretaries' to 'Executors'. This renders invalid the argument that the eventual departure of the *Acarya* by its very nature necessitated an automatic change in the system of corporate governance for ISKCON. The author has argued most strongly that the single institutional *Acarya* had deemed that the governance of ISKCON would actually continue after his departure, not with a successor *Acarya*, but solely via the GBC:

> **"Srila Prabhupada's intention, and his departure from the tradition of the institutional *Acarya*, is shown in a striking way in his will. Traditionally, it was in the *first article* of his will that an *Acarya* named his successor, passing on his institution to his heir as if it were his personal property. The *first article* of Srila Prabhupada's will reads: "The Governing Body Commission (GBC) will be the ultimate managing authority for the entire International Society for Krishna Consciousness."**
>
> **(CHCH)**

The author is correct that the GBC acts as the instrument that replaces the traditional system of successor *Acarya*. It does not however replace the system of rule via a single institutional *Acarya*, for its very purpose is to maintain the rule of the single institutional *Acarya* in the absence of the traditional successor. The author is therefore left in the invidious position of having provided himself the most compelling evidence that the system of governance in ISKCON was to continue with the same institutional *Acarya* system, and indeed the same institutional *Acarya*, which had governed ISKCON before the *Acarya*'s departure in 1977. The very existence of the GBC becomes the evidence that the institutional *Acarya*, who had founded an organisation to be the embodiment of his charismatic self, had no intention of handing *Acarya*-ship over to anyone else, as is done traditionally, but intended instead to retain this position for himself. Thus the organisation would continue to be managed on the basis of his rule in absentia, in exactly the same manner as when he was present. Thus nothing was to change. For the GBC was expressly set up to represent a single institutional *Acarya*, not replace him - a fact which only emerges when the GBC's very raison d'etre, as given in its constitutional incorporation in 1970, and its official definition as resolved in 1975, are presented. Items which were surprisingly omitted by the author in his paper.

> **"The problem arose when the conception of guru was implicitly based on a traditional model of an inspired, charismatic spiritual autocrat, an absolute and autonomously decisive authority, around whom an institution takes shape as the natural extension and embodiment of his charisma. Indeed, *Srila Prabhupada himself was such a guru.*"**
>
> **(CHCH, emphasis added)**

A Guru, whom as we have demonstrated, was to remain as such a Guru via the GBC, and who would thus need the instrument of *ritvik*s to allow the future members of the Society to continue to connect to him as this type of Guru. Indeed, the selection of *ritvik*s was documented by Srila Prabhupada with the same importance and authority as the establishment of the GBC. He issued a signed directive to the whole society on July 9th, 1977, just 120 days before his passing, where the arrangements for him to remain as the initiating *Acarya* of the society are set out (known henceforward as the July 9th directive). Arrangements which, as stated in the Will, were not to change:

> **"The system of management will continue as it is now and there is *no* need of any change."[9]**

The Will also makes further reference to the fact that Srila Prabhupada will remain as the initiating *Acarya* for the lifetime of the Society in the very next Article. Below we see how future executive directors for the immovable properties in India (which were meant to last for thousands of years) were to always be drawn from the pool of initiated disciples of Srila Prabhupada:

> **"The executive directors who have herein designated are appointed for life. In the event of the death or failure to act for any reason of any of the said directors, a successor director or directors may be appointed by the remaining directors, provided the new director is MY INITIATED DISCIPLE following strictly all the rules and regulations of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness as detailed in my books, and provided that there are never less than three (3) and five (5) executive directors acting at one time."[10] (emphasis added)**

A system of selecting future directors which could only be in place if the instrument of *ritvik*s, and not successor Gurus, was also

in place. Otherwise the pool of potential directors would dry up in 50 or so years.

In conclusion, as derived from the author's own words, rather then being an alternative to the model of rule via an institutional *Acarya*, the GBC is actually the modus operandi for rule by the single institutional *Acarya*. Thus not only was Srila Prabhupada the single institutional *Acarya* for ISKCON whilst he was present, but this arrangement was further institutionalised for the lifetime of ISKCON via the creation and designation of a GBC as permanent "ultimate managing authority" for ISKCON, supplemented by the selection of *Ritvik*s via the July 9th directive.

Fallacy 4:

That Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Had Wanted a GBC System In Opposition To A Single *Acarya* system

The Guru of Srila Prabhupada, Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura, had also established his own organisation, The Gaudiya Matha, for which he was also the single institutional *Acarya*. The author attempts to bolster his argument for the false dichotomy between the single institutional *Acarya* and the GBC, by alleging that the Gaudiya Matha came to grief because it also incorrectly attempted to install a single institutional successor *Acarya*, instead of a GBC system of management. In this way the author tries to lend historical credence to his model of the GBC/multiple successor guru paradigm by invoking effectively the authority of Srila Prabhupada's Guru, who it is implied had also authorised a GBC system instead of a single successor *Acarya*:

> **"Other accounts, from Gaudiya Matha sources, say that a Governing Body Commission was formed and operated for a while before the attempt to establish an *Acarya* at the head of the institution shattered the organization. In any case, it is clear that the previous generation came to grief on the same issue that confronted ISKCON: of forming a unified preaching mission that did not depend on the direction of any one individual but rather on a collegial body, functioning cooperatively. […] Indeed, the *Acarya* first established over the main body of the Gaudiya Matha suffered the same fate as that which befell a number of the ISKCON *Acarya*s: after being raised so high, he fell down from the principles of Krishna consciousness. From Srila Prabhupada's perspective, all these spiritual problems must be considered as the consequence of the disciples' disobedience of the order of the spiritual master. Learning from that failure, Srila Prabhupada set up a governing body and watched over its operations as it tried to manage the society."**
>
> **(CHCH)**

The author attempts to construct a parallel here that the previous generation was also at fault for attempting to install a successor *Acarya* as an alternative to a GBC. However Srila Prabhupada states that though such a GBC was authorised for the Gaudiya Matha, it was only a temporary arrangement, created to facilitate the selection of a successor *Acarya*, not replace one, who would then supersede the GBC:

> **"His idea was *Acarya* was not to be nominated amongst the governing body. He said openly you make a GBC and conduct the mission. So his idea was amongst the members of GBC who would come out successful and self effulgent *Acarya* would be automatically selected"[11]**
>
> **"He asked that "You form a governing body of twelve men and go on preaching, and Kunja Babu may be allowed to remain manager during his lifetime." He never said that Kunja Babu should be *Acarya*. None, none of them were advised by Guru Maharaja to become *Acarya*. His idea was "Let them manage; then whoever will be actual qualified for becoming *Acarya,* they will elect. Why I should enforce upon them?" That was his plan. "Let them manage by strong governing body, as it is going on. Then *Acarya* will come by his qualifications."[12]**

Thus the GBC body was simply to act as vehicle for initially managing the preaching until the real successor *Acarya* emerged from their ranks. Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura therefore did not replace the successor *Acarya* concept with a GBC that would manage a multitude of Gurus as we currently have in ISKCON - he simply withheld creating such a successor *Acarya* himself as is traditionally done - preferring instead that such a successor *Acarya* would emerge through self-effulgence from a GBC body, set up to manage the preaching in the meantime. This concept of a self-effulgent single-*Acarya*, as we have seen, is explained by the author to be the antithesis of the GBC/multiple Guru model which he puts forward:

> **"Two deviations from Prabhupada's order - the "zonal *Acarya*" system and the "posthumous *ritvik*" system - rest on adherence to the traditional idea of leadership. Each in its own way presumes that genuine authoritative leadership for the movement is found only when an autocratic figure become recognised by his compelling, charismatic presence or "self-effulgence", and who can then personify the institution. […] In the event, the Gaudiya Matha leaders disregarded this order, and instead they reverted to the traditional single-*Acarya* rule to which they were, after all, culturally habituated."[13]**
>
> **"But the idea of successor *Acarya*, whether one or many, and the idea of GBC are incompatible."[14]**

Thus it is clear that the arrangement that was set up in the Gaudiya Matha, far from supporting the author's idea of a GBC that would take the place of a single institutional successor *Acarya*, was actually the opposite, where the single institutional successor *Acarya* would eventually take the place of the GBC.

It is interesting to note therefore that the use of a GBC in the Gaudiya Matha was an arrangement different to both the author's false paradigms for the Gaudiya Matha and ISKCON (whereby the GBC was supposedly intended to permanently replace the single instutional *Acarya*), and also to the manner in which a GBC was created in actuality for ISKCON - to continue the rule of the existing single institutional *Acarya*.

Fallacy 5:

That the 'Guru Reform' Solved The 'Crisis' Which The 'Zonal *Acarya*' System Created

In CHCH, the author sets out the problem that the movement was facing in the mid-1980s:

> **"Within ten years of assuming the role of living exemplars and via media to God for thousands of new devotees, six of them had quite spectacularly plummeted, and ISKCON's survival was in doubt."**
>
> **(CHCH)**

He then confidently states that the reforms he enacted solved the problems the movement was facing:

> **"Although ISKCON's crisis of leadership and authority was precipitated by the falldowns and deviations of some of the gurus, that crisis was to a large extent *resolved* by a structural revisioning and reordering of the institutionalization of gurus in the society. […] It has taken time for confidence in ISKCON to be restored."**
>
> **(CHCH, emphasis added)**

However the truth is that actually none of this happened. The movement has continued to haemorrhage ever since these 'reforms' were instituted, with the now expanded number of Gurus also continuing to fall down and deviate. This has occurred to such an extent that ISKCON today truly does find itself at the edge of a precipice. The movement has less manpower now than it ever did at the height of the so-called 'zonal *Acarya*' crisis. The crisis of confidence was never really restored, but just temporarily covered over. On the contrary, it has simply worsened. The Gurus in the movement themselves have stated in recent months that the movement is in a *'mess', 'critical condition',* and that the status of the leadership is *'rock bottom'.* Indeed the current situation is best summed up by the author himself who stated in a confidential internal memo issued in May 2000 that the movement is *'disintegrating'*:

> **"How will we deal with our polarized and *disintegrating* society; how will we confront our conflicting moral claims?"[15]**

Leading Academic Also Aids The Deception

In one of the ICJ articles quoted above, ISKCON's leading academic, Hrdyananda Dasa Goswami, a visiting scholar at UCLA with a Phd from Harvard, also puts forward the false idea of multiple Gurus working under a GBC, rather than a GBC working under the directives of a single institutional Guru. He does this in his response to a challenge made by Dr. Rahul Peter Das, a noted academic who also contributes to the ICJ (Dr. Rahul Peter Das had questioned how the absolute and divine nature of the traditional 'vedic' Guru could be subject to the democratic forces inherently present in an ecclesiastical managerial body such as the GBC). *Goswami* opens by stating the issue at stake:

> **"Yet the basic issue remains: can the 'Hindu' or 'Vedic' guru authentically function under the authority of a governing body, however constituted? I will argue that he or she can, to some extent. I base my argument on a rather broad overview of Vedic civilisation, in the traditional, not the academic, sense of the term 'Vedic'."**
>
> **(ICJ, Volume 8, No.1, "*The Role of The Guru in a Multi-Guru Society*, Hrdayananda Goswami")**

Goswami in response then puts forward a series of arguments that have absolutely no relevance to the topic in hand. He tries to demonstrate the validity of the subordination of Gurus to a GBC by arguing that:

a) Gurus are always subordinate to the laws of God;

b) Gurus always operate in line with scripture and saintly persons;

> **"Returning to our cosmic village, we find that even the great *Acaryas*, what to speak of the 'ordinary' gurus, must obey the law of God. […] Srila Prabhupada taught the traditional view that one should confirm spiritual teaching through three authorities: guru, *sadhu* and *sastra* — one's own guru, other saintly persons, and sacred scriptures. Thus the guru functions within a cultural economy of checks and balances."**
>
> **(ICJ, Volume 8, No.1, "*The Role of The Guru in a Multi-Guru Society*, Hrdayananda Goswami")**

The first point is self-evident - and indeed is what defines a Guru. For no one would expect a Guru to teach that which is different to God, for then he would not be a Guru but a cheater. However there is great deal of difference between being subordinate to God, and being subordinate to an ecclesiastical managerial body, or GBC, which is the proposition under discussion. In theory most people would agree that an ecclesiastical body could be fallible and relative, whereas 'the law of God' would be infallible and absolute. The essence of the argument put by Dr Das is *'how can one justify the absolute and infallible entity, the Guru, acting under that which is both fallible and non-absolute, the GBC?'* The very fact that a Guru always acts and represents the laws of God and scripture is what makes the Guru absolute. It is not evidence of how the absolute nature of the Guru can be subordinated by a managerial body. To argue that one absolute entity functions under other absolute entities merely strengthens the argument that absolute entities do not act under fallible and relative ones. It certainly does not provide evidence for the proposition that they do.

The argument that the Guru will operate in line with scripture and *sadhus* (saintly persons), again is not evidence for the regulation of the Guru by a managerial body. The *sadhus* do not regulate the Guru, nor does the Guru function under their authority. Rather the reference points of scripture and *sadhu* merely provide a means by which the authenticity of the Guru can be established, for the bona-fide Guru will not speak differently to scripture or saintly personalities. Thus it is not that the bona fide Guru functions 'within a cultural economy of checks and balances', but rather these checks and balances can be used by the seeker as a means to establish if a Guru is genuine. The bona-fide Guru can not be subject to 'checks and balances', for by definition, if he is bona-fide, there is nothing to check and balance. Therefore the following conclusion put forward by *Goswami* is false:

The *Diksa* Guru Cannot Change.

The very notion that the initiation system, as outlined by Srila Prabhupada in his books, can be hijacked and adopted by all future current link *diksa* gurus, in itself raises serious questions. In this final section we show that it is actually impossible for any future *diksa* guru to legitimately operate within the philosophical framework established by Srila Prabhupada.

One characteristic that denotes that initiation has been taken from a specific *Diksa* Guru is the fact that the initiation vows taken relate specifically to that *Diksa* Guru. These vows may differ greatly from one *acharya* to the next- on down the disciplic succession. Thus the 16 rounds and 4 regulative principles package that allow one to be initiated by Srila Prabhupada was unique to him and him alone. Srila Bhaktisiddhanta, his spiritual master, had insisted on 64 rounds. If one went back a thousand years one would find gurus in our line preaching a different philosophy, what to speak of initiation vows. Thus successive *diksa* gurus are not restricted to prescribing the same *diksa* vows. If a devotee is required to follow the vows given by a particular *diksa* guru then it can only mean:

> **"Within the cosmic village of *Bhagavatam* culture, the guru, and even the great *Acarya*, functions within a system of constraints established by *dharma, sastra* (scripture) and the examples and teachings of recognised saints (*sadhus*). Thus, ISKCON's system of requiring the guru to abide by, and within, a social reality governed by the GBC does not intrinsically violate the tradition in which the Society finds its legitimacy."**
>
> **(ICJ, Volume 8, No.1, "*The Role of The Guru in a Multi-Guru Society*, Hrdayananda Goswami")**

For there is an intrinsic difference between the absolute reality as represented by God and the Guru on the one hand, and an ecclesiastical managerial body on the other. Indeed if the two are equated, then it would provide further evidence of the *'catholicisation'* of ISKCON, whereby it would be claimed the GBC operated on the absolute platform in the same way as the college of Cardinals become supposedly empowered to elect an infallible pope. Furthermore, a Guru that speaks non-differently to other saintly persons is not intrinsically the same as that Guru being guided by and abiding under their authority. To appreciate how this proposition of *Goswami* ultimately leads to absurdity, one only needs to note that there is no bar in ISKCON to anyone being a member of the GBC, either due to sex, race or their position in the authority hierarchy. Thus we are now faced with the theoretical possibility of the Guru 'abiding' under the aegis of his own disciple, who just happens to be a competent manager and has been appointed to the GBC. Indeed, according to ISKCON Law 3.5.1, GBC deputies, many of whom are disciples of the current Gurus, are already considered 'GBC members'.

Thus Dr Rahul's argument on the issue of the authority of the Guru not being subordinated to a GBC stands. Rather, as we have seen earlier, it is the GBC which is subordinated to the authority of the Guru.

The argument that Srila Prabhupada did empower the GBC to be the 'ultimate managing authority' governing ISKCON is not in itself evidence that genuinely absolute, and thus intrinsically autocratic, Gurus would be subordinate to such a body. For a start we must first question whether any of these Gurus should even exist in the first instance. We note that ISKCON guru apologists always like to start any discussion on the subject by assuming, *a priori*, that gurus other than Srila Prabhupada must exist within the movement. Yet this is the very issue under contention. In this way they assume that which must be proven. The valid argument put forward by Dr Rahul is yet more evidence against the proposition that Srila Prabhupada appointed both a GBC and Guru successors. A proposition which is so untenable that ISKCON leaders have been forced to contradict themselves and each other, as has been highlighted throughout this paper.

It is almost inevitable that as more and more members of the academic community become aware of these glaring discrepancies, these issues will have to be looked at more honestly. Especially if ISKCON is to attract the credibility it so transparently craves.

CONCLUSION

We have demonstrated the following:

1. The *'Guru reforms'* which took place in ISKCON in the mid-1980s, and on which the current Guru system in ISKCON is based, was a political exercise with no basis or authority from the Founder of ISKCON, Srila Prabhupada. Rather, the basis for these reforms were contradictory and without substance.

2. That these reforms succeeded only in replacing one unauthorised Guru system with another, and in doing so continued to suppress the *ritvik* system that was actually chosen by Srila Prabhupada for ISKCON's future, even though ironically these reforms were based on this very selection.

3. That the ISKCON leadership is *not* presenting an accurate account of these reforms, either to the movement's membership, or to the academic community that interacts with the movement.

In this paper we have quoted heavily from the author's paper. We make no apologies for this since we felt it important that these conclusions be substantiated by the words of the architect of the reforms in question. And with the words being those of the current ISKCON Chairman broadcast officially to the academic community, these conclusions cannot be easily dismissed by ISKCON's leadership as just another heretical opinion. Rather, if the movement is to have any credibility left, it will need to embrace these conclusions. The movement may be able to keep its dependent Temple residents in a state of confusion and ignorance over these issues, through banning, expulsion and suppression, but it cannot expect to fool the entire academic community; a community which ISKCON's leadership has been trying assiduously to cultivate in an effort to improve the movement's image.

> **"Our work of reform and renewal continues. It has to be perpetual. As part of that work, ISKCON is beginning to look back at itself, engaging in its own process of honestly coming to terms with its past. Only by so doing can it have a viable and progressive future."**
>
> **(CHCH)**

As we hope this critique has demonstrated, the process of reform and renewal has not yet even begun. Nor has the movement ever honestly come to terms with its past. Rather, it continues to live in denial, albeit in an extremely sophisticated and scholarly manner. Indeed, CHCH is trumpeted to the scholarly community as a supposedly honest and frank exercise in self-criticism. But elaborate academic conferences will not hide the simple fact that *one unauthorised Guru system has simply been replaced by another.* This is the real painful truth of the matter. And what we have seen is a consistently self-serving and inaccurate rendition of the facts surrounding Srila Prabhupada's instructions for how initiations should continue within his movement. The academic community has been cleverly fed a tissue of lies dressed up as convivial soul-searching, whilst dissenters are surreptitiously *muzzled* in the background.

We are, however, fully in agreement with the author's final sentence. **Only when the movement truthfully confronts its past, and implements the real desires of Srila Prabhupada, can it have a 'viable and progressive future'.** We hope those who interact with the movement will urge the ISKCON leadership to start this process by addressing the conclusions presented in this essay. Only by doing so, we believe, will the true dawn of reform bless ISKCON with all success.

[1] Spiritual Master / Guru

[2] A *ritvik* is an officiating priest who performs the spiritual ceremony of initiation on behalf of the Initiating (Diksa) Guru.

[3] Diksa is the process of initiating a disciple with spiritual knowledge. The person who establishes this sacred and eternal bond with the disciple is called the Diksa Guru, or Initiating Guru. Prior to his passing in November 1977, Srila Prabhupada was the sole Diksa Guru for ISKCON. There can also be many other Gurus who assist the disciple through relevant instructions. These are known as Siksa or instructing Gurus.

[4] Conversations With Srila Prabhupada, volume 33, Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1991, pp 269-270

[5] Allegiance to Guru, to ISKCON and to Prabhupada, Ravindra Svarupa Das, 1998

[6] Second Article of Srila Prabhupada's Last Will and Testament

[7] Definition of GBC, Resolution 1, GBC minutes 1975

[8] The Direction of Management, 28th July, 1970

[9] Op cit.

[10] Statement 3, Srila Prabhupada's Last Will and Testament

[11] Letters from Srila Prabhupada, volume IV, The Vaisnava Institute in association with Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1987, pp. 2476-2478 (emphasis added)

[12] Conversations With Srila Prabhupada, volume 6, Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1989 (emphasis added)

[13] Allegiance to Guru, to ISKCON and to Prabhupada, Ravindra Svarupa Das, 1998

[14] Under My Order, Ravindra Svarupa Das, 1985

[15] Ravindra Svarupa Das, from a memo to the rest of the Governing Body Commission of ISKCON, May 2000

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